

Police union defends Val-d'Or officers, warns stories of abuse are only allegations

Quebec's provincial police union (APPQ) is rushing to the defence of its members, following allegations from aboriginal women in Val-d'Or who say they were sexually assaulted by officers stationed there.

Radio-Canada's investigative program, Enquête, recently uncovered stories of sexual violence toward aboriginal women in the Quebec town about 500 km northwest of Montreal.

The report included allegations that certain police officers would routinely pick up women who appeared to be intoxicated, drive them out of town and leave them to walk home in the cold. Some women alleged they were physically assaulted or made to perform sex acts.

Pierre Veilleux, the APPQ's president, travelled to Val d'Or Monday to meet with his association's members in light of that report.

In a statement, Veilleux cautioned against leaping to conclusions.

"The allegations in the Enquête report that aired last Thursday are worrisome, and we feel it is necessary to set the record straight. Let's be clear. At this point, they are only allegations, and the presumption of innocence is a fundamental principle in our justice system. We should not lose sight of that," Veilleux said in a statement.

"This crisis brings to light a social issue in aboriginal communities living with great difficulties right across the country. It would be unfortunate if the police officers in question were to become scapegoats for problems that go far beyond their duties."

He said the investigation into the allegations will continue, and in the meantime Veilleux asked the public to let justice take its course.

"It is high time that the various stakeholders in the public sphere stop fuelling the popular condemnation of Sûreté du Québec police officers," he said.

Veilleux called on Canadian society at large to help find "viable solutions" for its most vulnerable people, adding that the association supported the call for a Canada-wide commission of inquiry.

Val-d'Or officers call in sick en masse

The eight officers alleged of wrongdoing in Val-d'Or have either been put on leave or transferred to administrative duties as the investigation continues.

Meanwhile, other officers at the Val-d'Or provincial police detachment have formed a united front in the face of the allegations.

In solidarity with those under investigation, all SQ police officers at the Val-d'Or detachment – Station 144 – who were scheduled to work over the weekend called in sick.

One officer confirmed to Radio-Canada, under the condition of anonymity, that not a single officer came into work at the station on Saturday and Sunday.

He told CBC's French-language service that he and his co-workers are frustrated by the lack of support from their employer.

According to Radio-Canada, the officer said that he and his colleagues have been dealing with insults in the field since the day after the Enquête story aired last Friday.

Radio-Canada said SQ officers from elsewhere in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region were called in to replace those who called in sick.